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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the premise that writing cannot be separated from the subject written about, composition teachers should address themselves to what their students are learning in the process of writing. Some writing courses introduce students to great books but those books are usually written only by white men. Others open students to multicultural diversity but the anthologies used essentialize race and gender differences; however noble these courses may be, their purpose is dubious: Is building tolerance the job of a composition course? As an alternative, writing courses can be centered around historical moments that involve rhetorical interaction between cultures and viewpoints. They can introduce students to multicultural pluralism but do so with a clear sense of purpose. Frederic Jameson has argued that effective democratic communication requires that people be able conceptually to locate themselves in history. A course taught at Holy Cross asked students to participate in a debate over the meaning of the phrase "all men are created equal" from the 19th century to the present. The students first read a variety of scholarly interpretations. Then the students wrote and shared diverse assignments working over the readings: summarizing, analyzing rhetorical strategies, or reworking the beginning of the Declaration of Independence as one of the scholars would have done it. (TB)

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Theories of Content

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Let me begin by stipulating that "content," for purposes of this essay, means "what students in writing classes are writing about." I know it is a current truism in our field that insofar as writing courses have content, the "content" is information about writing processes. This truism implies that we think we can separate the teaching of writing from what students are writing about; and it is because of this supposed separation that we think we can avoid talking about what students are writing about, and teach "only" composing processes.

Whether or not this separation of content and technique is theoretically sound constitutes one of the oldest controversies in the history of rhetoric. Plato feared that composing techniques could be indeed be separated from the material composed, and used to compose any material--this is what he condemned in rhetoric. In his view, separable techniques could be used to put over any content, no matter how evil.

Another strand in classical rhetorical theory, however, which is often traced from Isocrates through Cicero to Quintilian, denied the separability of technique and content and prescribed for the education of the rhetorician extensive reading in history, literature, and philosophy. One reason for this regimen was that the knowledge thus gained would need to be used in good compositions, in order to communicate with an audience who shared the knowledge, and thus would be as important to good composition as the techniques of composing practiced with the master. Another reason was that this knowledge modelled good values and thus, as the apprentice rhetorician internalized it, increased the chances (although with no guarantees) that the rhetorician would act on these good values.

Classical theory is congruent here with contemporary theories of learning, reading comprehension, and composing, all of which suggest that in order to write about something, students have to integrate it with what they already know and thus construct their own interpretation of it. This integration is what made the classical rhetoricians hope that exposure to good values would affect students' values; and it is also what made them think that effective rhetoricians would need to draw on knowledge that their audience shared. Now we would say that this process of integration is the very process of learning; without it, neither reading comprehension nor written composition can take place (see, e.g., Petrosky).

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So whatever students are reading in the writing class, whether it be their classmates' papers or the selections in an anthology, they are perforce learning about it. If they weren't, they wouldn't be able to write about it. Another way to put this would be to say that writing teachers are teaching students the knowledge content of whatever they are reading, whether this is the teachers' intention or not. And teachers are commenting on the students' use of this content in their writing, unless teachers never comment on anything other than grammar mistakes. Even if the teacher is able to preserve a seeming separation between composing and content in comments such as, "You need more evidence here to make your argument about killing all homosexuals more convincing," even here, the teacher is commenting on how the student has handled the knowledge content of the essay.

So I think we should ask ourselves what we are teaching by the choices we make about what students are to write about. There seems to be a range of tacit answers to this question in the course contents currently in use. For example, some writing courses use anthologies that attempt to illustrate for students the conventions of academic discourse, with writing samples from various disciplines; or the knowledge content of academic literacy, with "great books" selections. This content can be justified theoretically along lines analogous to the classical argument I have just sketched: it gives students knowledge they need to appeal to audiences who share academic literacy, while at the same time increasing the chances that students will internalize the academic discourse conventions they need to master in order to succeed in school.

These are good reasons for teaching academic content in the writing class. At the same time, however, I am troubled by an argument from the concept of "cultural capital," that is, the idea that the knowledge a person possesses is a function of his or her social group memberships. One could argue that academic content is closer to the cultural capital brought to school by white heterosexual males of the upper social classes than it is to the knowledge and discourse practices of any other group.

If this is so, then this privileged group has more prior knowledge of the academic discourse content to be taught, the prior knowledge necessary to integration, interpretation, and composition according to the theories I have just been discussing. This explains why the privileged group has an advantage in the classroom where academic discourse is taught, and all other groups are at a disadvantage. For example, Patricia J. Williams and Angeletta K. M. Gourdine both have testified to the educational dysfunction and personal pain the teaching of academic discourse can cause to African American students when its lack of match with the content of their own cultural capital is not acknowledged.

Even if one wishes to defend the teaching of academic content on grounds that all students need this knowledge to succeed in school--and I can see the merit of this argument, although I don't want to get into it here--the problem remains of how to build bridges from this content to the prior knowledge that students from less privileged social groups bring to school. Such bridges must be built for composing to occur; but I don't know of a reliable pedagogy to do so.

To address this difficulty, one might take the approach to content that makes it whatever the students choose to write about. If the content is the students' choice, then presumably they can draw on whatever cultural capital they bring to class. No one will have a disadvantage based on the prior knowledge he or she possesses. This approach is sometimes pursued with the aid of anthologies that present content all people, whatever their resources of cultural capital, are presumed to share, such as selections about various aspects of personal life that "everyone" is presumed to have experienced, childhood or schooling, for example; or more formal bellettristic meditations on issues supposed to be of current concern to "everyone," such as gender relations or race relations.

Here the reading does not seem to be assigned in order to convey necessary knowledge content, but rather simply to serve as a prompt for the students to develop their own writing. For example, an anthology selection on Native American marriage customs might be used to stimulate students to reflect on bonding patterns in their own communities, without much attention to whether this reading is teaching them anything about Native Americans.

True, the personal-life or bellettristic anthologies usually include selections from a variety of ethnic, racial and cultural groups. There may be some intent to encourage tolerance by giving students more information about different social groups, and I certainly approve this intent. But it is considered highly controversial to make tolerance the object of direct instruction in a writing class. Rather, the most widely accepted theoretical justification for the diversity of these readers is that they maximize the chances that all the diverse students in the class will see their cultural capital legitimated in the academy.

Again, while this is a worthy goal, I am troubled by some problems here as well. For one thing, this is a somewhat essentialized approach to what students might want to read and how they might want to write. The assumption seems to be that although tolerance may be a valuable but secondary by-product, the main reason the selections by, let's say, African Americans are there in the anthologies is to legitimate the cultural capital of African American students, and so on. This approach tends to close off discourse possibilities for the students thus

essentialized, as Victor Villanueva and bell hooks, for example, have both testified. They explain that their writing styles have been enriched by a variety of sources: Villaneuva draws on classical sophistic rhetoric, which he links historically to his own Puerto Rican heritage; hooks asserts her right to speak in a variety of voices and not only the Black English vernacular that a college writing teacher wanted to push her into.

Moreover, in a class where the content focus is on the individual sensibility and on personal responses to experience, there is an inevitable tendency to teach students how to feel, teaching them what representations of their experiences are going to seem sophisticated and persuasive. For example, as Bruce Herzberg and I have argued, this tendency can be observed in the choices writing teachers made for what student essays to include in the anthology What Makes Writing Good. In some courses, the responsibility for responding to representations of experience is placed on the students themselves, but these situations may be no less oppressive, as majority views of how people should behave get imposed on everyone in the class. This kind of schooling of the emotions borders on oppressive surveillance.

I think we need to examine the rhetorical goals of our approaches to content. Some motives for content choices don't appear to be rhetorical at all, as when we say we've picked readings to be "interesting" or "fair." On the other hand, if we say we are teaching the conventions of academic discourse or the bellettristic essay, then at least we do have rhetorical goals in mind; but as I have suggested above, there may still be composing problems created by wide mismatches between the knowledge content of such courses and the cultural capital of less privileged students.

I would like to propose another approach to defining the content of the composition course, one that I hope meets some of these objections. I suggest that we attempt to devise materials with the idea in mind of educating our students to be effective communicators in a multicultural democracy, the United States. As I have recently argued, we might organize these materials around historical moments that present what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones," where cultures meet, struggle, and mingle.

One advantage to this approach is that it provides a rationale not only for making the materials multicultural, and thus preserving one of the advantages of the personal-experience or belletristic-essay approach, but also for avoiding essentializing these materials, and thus correcting one of the problems of this approach. Students will see their own cultural capital legitimated in the academy, but at the same time, they will have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with a wide range of materials so that they will be able not only to increase their own repertoire of discourse practices but also to increase

the range of practices employed by others that they can understand. The students will be able to develop personal styles, but with both the freedom to range over a variety of cultural practices in developing these styles, and the responsibility to communicate across cultural boundaries both within and outside the classroom.

Another advantage to this approach is that it is properly rhetorical, focussing on the strategies developed for communicating both within various groups and across cultural boundaries. This approach thus preserves an advantage of the academic-discourse approach in that it encourages the study of discourse location or discourse community, a useful analytic tool in the variety of discourse situations a multicultural democracy presents.

In addition to being multicultural and rhetorical, I would argue that course content should also be historical. The United States has always been a multicultural country, and the rhetorical strategies of many groups have developed their richness over time, through experiences of negotiating difference at various moments in American history. Therefore, to appreciate the fullest range of these rhetorical strategies, some attention to their historical development is needed. Moreover, I would argue with Fredric Jameson that effective democratic communication, as well as other forms of political action, require that people be able conceptually to locate themselves in history, to see their relationships to their own groups and other groups in the past, present, and future (he calls this kind of knowledge "cognitive mapping").

The materials for such course content could vary widely as to genre, from argumentative public speeches to intimate personal narratives, and including visual texts as well. I would want any collection of materials to include contemporary materials, just to emphasize the relevance of course activities to contemporary life; but I think it is necessary for rhetorical richness that contemporary materials be linked to the powerful rhetorical traditions from which they have developed. I've found in my own classes that it is especially empowering for student writers from oppressed social groups to learn that people like themselves have been using language against oppression with eloquence, and some practical success, for a long time. This vista of a rhetorical tradition of their own can offer more courage for present struggles than an exhortation to a misplaced middle class individualism, asking them to stand alone on bitterly contested contemporary rhetorical turf with no more protection than their "own opinions."

I'd like to conclude by briefly describing a composition course I taught in the fall 1993 semester that employed materials of the kind I am describing. Most of the students in this class

would be classified as basic writers if Holy Cross sorted composition students according to such categories (we don't). I assembled materials centering around the debate in antebellum America on the meaning of the phrase "all men are created equal," from the Declaration of Independence. This phrase became a bone of contention in the increasingly heated debates over slavery in the period. We read selections from the writings of both European American defenders and African American attackers of slavery, comparing their rhetorical uses of the Declaration and the ways they played off of each others' arguments.

For example, defender David Christy argued that this phrase was never intended to mean all people, but only people like those who signed the Declaration, namely white men of the upper social classes. In contrast, attacker Charles Langston argued that African Americans' participation in the American Revolution testified to their inclusion in the promises of the Declaration, and that resistance to slavery actually built upon Revolutionary ideals. In effect, African American rhetoricians disinherited white defenders of slavery, and depicted themselves as the true descendents of the revered founding fathers. Rhetoric scholars Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites have argued that our contemporary interpretation of the phrase "all men are created equal" to include all people is in fact largely the result of the powerfully successful efforts of these African American rhetoricians.

My students wrote and shared a variety of assignments working over these difficult and lengthy readings: they summarized the arguments, analyzed and compared the writers' rhetorical strategies, and tried their own powers in papers that asked them, for example, to rewrite the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence as one of our authors would have done it, explaining the changes they made; or to explain how any writer should address the problem of speaking to two audiences at the same time, those who agree and those who disagree, illustrating from the work of one of our authors.

I won't say that we were always able to live up to my high hopes for the course, but still, there were some exciting moments in student papers. For example, when asked to compare the rhetorical strategies of slavery defenders Christy, George Fitzhugh, and Albert Bledsoe, Tawanya Garrett, an African American student, pointed out that these writers, on the one hand, claim that enslaved people are not well educated enough to take care of themselves if free, and, on the other, deny them access to education. She not only noted the failure of these writers' attempts to sound reasonable and humane here, but she also commented on the intertextuality of the rhetoric. She took to task Christy, chronologically the latest writer, because he didn't notice the contradictions in the work of his earlier colleagues but repeated many of them instead.

Of course, in any one semester a class such as I am describing could touch on only a small portion of the rich multicultural rhetorical content in American archives. The job of pursuing the kind of citizenship education I am calling for must be undertaken collectively, with many teachers and students contributing to the collection of materials. But at any rate, we will be approaching the content of the composition course systematically, with a utopian project in view, even if it forever recedes from us. I hope this will help us to meet our primary responsibility, to help all of our students develop their writing ability with content that is multicultural, historical, and rhetorical, and that encourages them for the ongoing task of negotiating difference.

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